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Re-reading Githa Hariharan's *When Dreams Travel* : A Feminist approach

Abstract: Indian women writers have always tried to depict the plight of women in a patriarchal society. The progressive elements of feminist ideas and the status of women are all being thoroughly scrutinized in their works. Feminism intends to rebel against the hostile environment in which a woman is forced to live. While many writers are noteworthy of their style and some for their endless spirit, Githa Hariharan is one who has always been known for her depiction of feminist philosophy in her works. She, through her works turns our attention to the problems faced by women. The novel *When Dreams Travel* explores the issues from a feminist perspective in the backdrop of a mythical and very dreamy environment. It illustrates how the women are tormented and exploited in a male dominated society. Through this article an attempt has been made to shed light on the feminist elements in her work.

Keywords: Feminism, Post Modernism, Liberation

The protagonists in the novels of Githa Hariharan tend to question the authenticity of the so called accepted values and conducts of the society and protest against the existing social norms which totally deny freedom and identity for a woman. The suffering and sacrificing that is typical of Indian novels is not seen in the works of Githa Hariharan. Her treatment of

feminism is from a new mode. The protagonists of her novels can be seen trying to break themselves from the clutches of tradition. In *When Dreams Travel*, she uses the post modern technique of fantasy and magic realism. Sunita Sinha states “In her third novel *When Dreams Travel*(1999), Githa Hariharan rewrites the canonical text of *The Thousand and One Nights* from a feminist angle.”(Sinha 111) fantasy is quite different from that of a fairytale or supernatural writing as it tends to question our very notion about this real world.

Like her ground breaking novel *The Thousand faces of Night*, the novel portrays the women who are being marginalised in our society, but the approach and narrative techniques that has been employed in *When Dreams Travel* are quite different. The myths are being retold from a feminine perspective and the revolt of the victim is the central idea in *The thousand Faces of Night*, whereas the narrative technique and the mythical environment is handled in an intelligent manner in *When Dreams Travel*. Story telling is a very vital part of Indian tradition, practiced since ages. The novel treats this as a tradition that is being passed on from generation to generation. The sufferings, pain and unfulfilled desires are voiced through these narrations. This is evident in the case of Shahrzad who was successful in liberating herself and other women too. Stories turned out to be so fascinating that Shahryar forgets his evil deed, to assault and kill a woman without any mercy. It is the power of story telling that turns the whole situation upside down.

The story telling plays a vital role in *When Dreams Travel* and it helps in reconstructing the past lives of the female characters in the novel. The painful past is being revealed through this technique. The power that the story telling has is evident in *The Thousand Faces of Night* too as we what impact it had in Devi, but the purpose and the need to tell the story is treated differently in this novel. Shahrzad wanted to make Shahryar numb by her art of storytelling, so that she could save herself and other women too. “If she stops, she collapses, if she loses Shahryar’s interest or attention, the roof could cave in, and with it, all the hope of the city’s

deliverance, or its sultan's redemption"(7) We see the adventurous stories of Bulukiya, filled with suspense and horror. The power of storytelling is evident in Gita Hariharan's *The Ghost of Vasu Master* too. Here the story is being provided with somewhat satisfactory ending.

The stories of *Dunyazad* throws light on the women issues, the problems that she faces in a patriarchal society. When *Dunyazad* and *Dilshad* share the stories they seem to enjoy a certain kind of freedom from the bondage. They have been successful in creating a world of their own, a world in which they can fulfil all their long cherished desires. They are totally free from the male domination and the customs and the traditions that the society has imposed upon them. They find support and trust for each other. *Shaharyar's* rigid rules are being abolished by the power of storytelling. The story of *Dilshad* shows a sharp contrast in the opinions of man and woman and in the story of *Satyasama* we see women being given equal status as that of men. The story telling brings forth the feminine sensibility of the women who are self driven and who possess an uncompromising spirit. *Githa Hariharan*, through the novel has provided ample space to her characters where they could turn themselves out to be self-willed like *Dilshad* and *Shahrzad*. Such a thing can only be rarely witnessed in our real world. The world we live in is shaped by the rules and norms of the patriarchal society. There is a vast difference in the priority of men and women and the choices that they had to make in this life. Women are always depicted as sacrificing and giving up their dreams, but men are symbols of bravery and courage and they completely suppress and exploit women for their benefits.

In the novel, we come across *Dunyazad* telling about the pitiable plight of woman through her story telling, in *Three Scenes* and *a Father*. It reveals the cruelties showed by a woman's husband and her father-in-law. Nothing is being concealed in her narration. All the pains and agonies find voice through her story telling. We see how women suffer in this novel. *Shahryar* has thought of women to be a mere puppet whom he can play with in what all ways he likes. She is being commodified. A realistic portrait of the society too is depicted in *When*

Dreams Travel. Shahryar is in need of a virgin every night for raping her and slitting her throat and cuts her body into pieces. Shahrzad is not just a woman in the novel, but she is a symbol of every Indian woman who is made to suffer in the hands of men.

The sultan that we come across is not just a male pertaining to a particular age, but a symbol of the cruel and rude male prevalent in every age, from the past up to the postmodern era. When *Dreams Travel* begins with the portrayal of the miserable plight of women seen through the eyes of Dunyazad and Shahrzad. In this postmodern era, many things have changed except the status of woman. When Shahrzad is with Shahryar “he is staring at Shahrzad as if ready to devour her.”(6) The situation turns out to be more pitiable as we confront Dunyazad “waiting for her cue to ask a question, or exclaim piously, or gasp, or groan or sigh at the right times”(5) Shahrzad very cleverly uses her ability without getting nervous . to save herself and all other women waiting to be victims in the hands of the Sultan, she creates a world of magic and wonder and her endless stories continues for a thousand nights. The novel makes it clear to the readers that once the torments are accepted, there is no going back. It expands and demands something more cruel and brutal. One gives way to the other. Another stark reality that we come across is that Shahrzad is not acknowledged by the society. Her sacrifice created so much fear inside the mind of the people “that not one family in the city would admit to harbouring a virgin daughter any longer.”(269) the very people for whom she had sacrificed everything tend to forget her and not understand the depth of her sacrifices. Even Shahryar remembers her only for her chastity and not for the creative talent that she possessed. This is the case with every men who are blind to the true virtue of women. Men manipulate things for their own convenience.

Wazir recognizes her hectic task that Shahrzad has to continue for the thousand and one nights which in turn saves the lives of other young women of her place too. it is evident in his words. She risked her own life and her pain, distress and agony is really evident when she says,

“I, Shahrzad, saved your grandmothers from being beheaded. I saved then, and so your mothers and you. You would not be here if I had not done it!”(275)

Indian patriarchal mode suppresses women and never extends position and power even to the most deserving women, which is evident in the case of Shahrzad who became a sultana. Shaharyar, even though he felt at a later stage that he had done wrong, never tries to accept it openly and we don't see him asking forgiveness. Dunyazad too in the novel is Indian patriarchal mode suppresses women and never extends position and power even to the most deserving women, which is evident in the case of Shahrzad who became a sultana. Shaharyar, even though he felt at a later stage that he had done wrong, never tries to accept it openly and we don't see him asking forgiveness. Dunyazad too in the novel is portrayed as a brave and daring woman. Through her female characters, Hariharan tend to reinstate that whoever she is, a woman needs to lead a suppressed life.

It is rather interesting to note that when the old man finishes his story in correction to the old woman's story there is not even a chase of a quarrel as to whose story is right and whose is wrong. This is a perfect example of a male dominated society. Another discarded character is Satyasama, when she discards the plot of the story and remodels it according to her perceptions and workings of the world, she is being thrown out. Suffering and agony is juxtaposed with the stories told by Dilshad or Dunyazad. the grief and pain of Sahiba, a nursemaid of the palace of Samarkand is evident as she remembers the memories of her working period. Women in our society tend to conceal their pain and agony, they bear it hoping one day it will end, but it is an endless hope for them. The character of One-Eye peeps into the life of mentally ill women. Her feelings remain suppressed and when she tries to speak up she is severely punished. She is given a life by Hariharan even after her death.

A woman is dominated by her father, husband and her son. Dunyazad is dominated by her son. Though the world leaves no choice before women rather than to fall victim, women

desire to live and to move on no matter how hard her circumstances are. As GhoshMohua points it out in *When Dreams Travel: Writing Back to The Arabian Nights*: “But Hariharan makes Shahrzad emerge as the epitome of conscious feminist effort for survival in a society, which is hostile to, and annihilating for women.”(124)

GithaHariharan , through her novel has tried to explore women’s desires and comes to the conclusion that a women’s desires can never be fully suppressed even if men try to do so. The oppression of women by men is very much evident in the treatment of merchant and especially in the Brahmin-magician. The women are just toys in the hands of men. The jinni woman in Duniyazad’s story is a lustful woman who attracts men and collects their rings as a symbol of the conquest of a woman over man. Hariharan through her story gives platform to women to assert their identities and fulfil their wishes in the midst of all the hurdles that have been created by men. Some of Hariharan’s characters are doomed to decay by the very society or even their close relatives. Lonely Voice in Dilshad’s story is an example for this. Duniyazad’s desire for self-assertion, for finding her true identity is very much evident from her last story The Dreams of Good Women. She wishes for an identity that is quite different from that of her sister Shahrzad. We see her telling “I love my sister but I do not want to be her shadow.”(256) these words are aimed at not just the Sultan but all dominating males who try to suppress female under their power by turning around everything in their favour. Even the customs, the rules and notions of the society are in their favour.

The different aspects of the male dominated society are being portrayed in the novel. Raziya , the mother of Duniyazad and Shahrzad had to surrender and carefully follow the instructions given to her by her husband. The very meaning of her name is ‘to agree.’ her name is highly symbolic of her destiny. We see the suppressed desire and expectation of Shahrzad finding expression when she claims that she also has desire and the right to rule, right to travel or at least the right to dream. Dreams and imaginations rule the novel as it reveals the hidden

expectations, unfulfilled desires and miseries of woman. It is indeed powerful. The stories told by Shahrzad are purely based on her imagination in which she tends to give voice to her own turmoil.

It is through the dreams and imaginations that we get to know the true desires of the characters. This imagination throws light on the psyche of the characters. How they perceive things, the mindset of the characters is all revealed through dreams and imaginations. Dunyazad's dream to be a martyr and search for her sister is revealed through her vague dream. Hariharan has masterfully crafted myths and legends in her story to see it from a new perspective. She uses myths to bring out the harsh realities of life, the pathetic condition of women in the patriarchal society. The elements of mystery and suspense are prominent throughout the novel. The fantasy and dream like elements are merged with the acute suffering of women in the society. The stories that are being narrated in the novel has in them elements of magic realism, even though the setting seems to be unreal it is a pen picture of the ugly and stark realities of the society. Thus the whole novel can be thought of as a conscious effort from the part of the writer to make women conscious about their marginalized spaces in the society. In order to liberate herself, woman needs to empower herself to confront different institutional structures and cultural practices that subject herself to patriarchal domination and control. Through her female characters she has tried to depict how women survive in a male dominated society, women faces the problems in her life and even survives with her inner strength and female bonding. Githa Hariharan shows how the kind, calm composed woman reveals her extraordinary power for her survival.

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